Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 14 Number 7 August 2017

**FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 20th August 2017: Narsapur. Meeting point: Punjagutta (opp. Mangatrai Pearls), 6.00AM.**

Always a dependable birding location, the beauty and bird richness of the verdant Narsapur Forest would be much-enhanced by the recent rains. Do bring your children along as it is important to catch them young and initiate them into nature and its power of regeneration. This would be a half-day trip. Carry water and breakfast. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

**INDOOR MEETING: Talk by Anuradha Vinodh: THE INCREDIBLE INSECT WORLD**
**Thursday, 17th August 2017, 6.00PM: Hamburg Hall, Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500 034.** (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

Anuradha Vinodh, nature and wildlife enthusiast, has been working in the field of wildlife and environmental education since 1997. She was nominated for the Indira Gandhi Paryavaran Puraskar in 2014. She has worked in organisations such as Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), C.P.R. Environmental Education Centre and Telangana Forest Department (previously A.P. Forest Department) till March 2016. Presently she is working as a freelance consultant with WWF India-Telangana State office, Telangana Forest Department, CEE, APFA, etc.

What is the difference between butterflies and moths? Why do fireflies glow? How do cicadas make noise? Is Cricket an insect? Did you know that ants build nests too? Why aren't spiders called insects? These and many more questions will be answered by Ms Anuradha Vinodh. Insects are the most intriguing creatures on this earth. Go to any corner of the earth, the first creatures to mark their presence are the insects. They comprise almost two-thirds of the world's animal population! This talk will take a peep into the incredible world of insects which play a very important role in our ecosystem. Ants, bees, butterflies and wasps aid in pollination. They also play a major role in maintaining a balance in nature. They are the chief source of food for birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals and even other insects! Unfortunately, these benefactors of nature are often looked down upon with disgust. To clear out all the false beliefs about these magnificent creatures, a presentation on the 'Incredible Insect World' is a necessity. Please join us in this beautiful journey and explore the incredible world of insects!

## THE PEN & THE BINOCULAR (part-2)

Humayun Taher

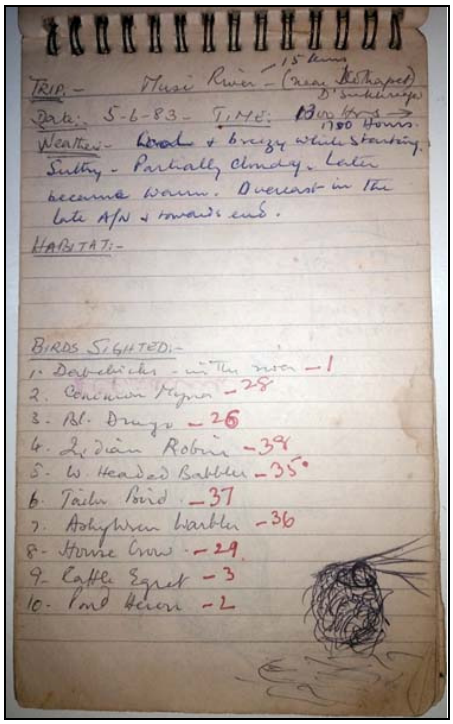
This was a field list with a difference! Our equipment was somewhat contradictory… two air-guns of, even then, ancient vintage, three binoculars, one well-equipped lunch-cum-tea basket and one well-preserved Honorary Wildlife Warden! Eccentric, did you say… You have no idea!

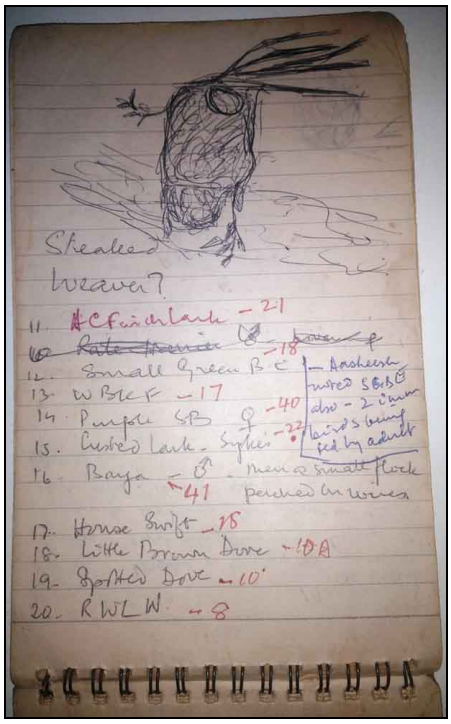
Ever since we got into this fascinating world of birds and birding, hardly a week went by without either myself or my father, usually both, making a short trip to a nearby bird-shop. This particular one was just opposite the GPO building in Abid Road. We had, a few weeks back, noted the presence here of Baya Weavers, Streaked Weavers and another species of weaver that was new to us, the Black-breasted Weaver. Questioning the bird-seller, we were told these birds had been caught around Hyderabad, and when we went deeper into the matter, we were informed of an area along the banks of the Musi River, where these birds were nesting in large numbers. That was enough for us! Back home, we laid plans to go out to this place on a combined bird-watching and collecting trip. No doubt this sounds almost sacrilegious in this day and age, but it must be remembered that in those days, cameras were almost unheard of – at least in this part of the country – and the only way to get a particular species identified was through a specimen. Talks with the BNHS high-command further encouraged us as they also told us to obtain a specimen and send it to them.

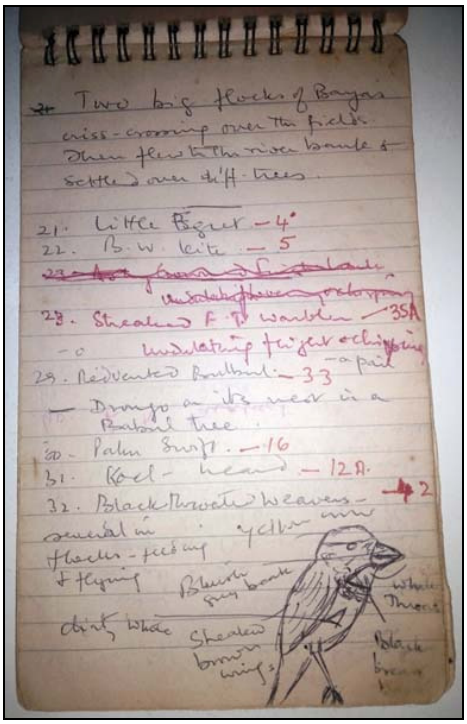
But why this fuss? Simply because, at that time, the Black-breasted Weaver was unknown in this region. Apparently, the range did not extend this far south. The question remained how they got here, whether these were caged birds that had escaped

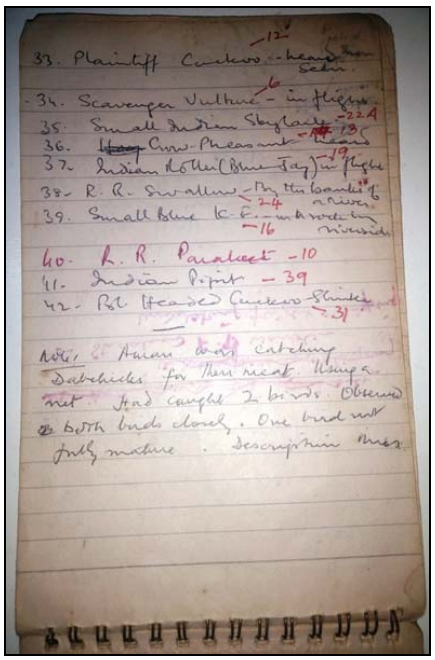
and established a breeding population, or whether they had always been there and had not been recorded. All such pleasant questions were rather above my young mind, but since my prowess with my old BSA air-rifle was well-known, I was recruited to play the part of collector-in-chief in this trip. Rajeev was collector number two (armed with his "modern" Diana air-rifle); Siraj *saab* and Aasheesh donned the garb of the "scientific ornithologists", and Maj. AA Aziz represented the awful majesty of the law (he was Honorary Wildlife Warden for the state!). Thus equipped, the expedition started off on a Sunday afternoon, for a place called Kothapet, near Dilsukhnagar, on the banks of the Musi River. The date was the 5th of June, **1983**!

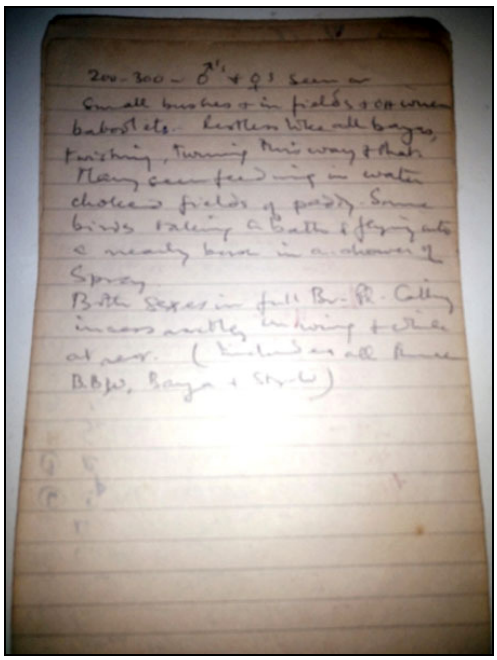
Below are the pages of our field notes from this trip…


TRIP - Musi River - (near Kothapet)
Date: 5-6-83 - TIME:
Weather -
Habitat:-
Birds Sighted:-
1. Dabchicks - in the river - 1
2. Cormorant Nigra - 28
3. Bl. Drongo - 26
4. Indian Robin - 34
5. W. Headed Babbler - 35
6. Jacky Bird - 37
7. Ashy Wren Warbler - 36
8. House Crow - 29
9. Cattle Egret - 3
10. Pond Heron - 2


Sheaked
Weaver?
11. Ref Avadavat - 21
12. Small Green B.C. - 18
13. W Bk C - 17
14. Purple SB ♀ - 40
15. Crested Lark - Syke's - 22
16. Baya - ♂ - 41
17. House Swift - 15
18. Little Brown Dove - 10A
19. Spotted Dove - 10
20. R W L W - 8


Two big flocks of Bayas criss-crossing over the fields. Then flew to the river bank & settled over tall trees.
21. Little Egret - 4
22. B.W. Kite - 5
23. Sheaked F.T. Warbler - 35A
29. Redvented Bulbul - 33
30. Palm Swift - 16
31. Koel - heard - 12A
32. Black Throated Weavers - 42
Black throated Weaver


33. Plain tiff Cuckoo - heard - 12
34. Scavenger Vulture - in flight - 6
35. Small Indian Skylark - 22A
36. Grey Pheasant - heard - 19
37. Indian Roller (Blue Jay) in flight
38. R.R. Swallow - By the banks of a river - 24
39. Small Blue K.F. - in a wooded riverside - 16
40. R.R. Parakeet - 10
41. Indian Pipit - 39
42. Bl Headed Cuckoo Shrike - 31
Note: Avian bird catching Dabchicks for their meat. Usually met had caught 2 birds. Observed both birds closely. One bird not fully mature. Description mine.


200-300 - ♂'s + ♀'s seen in small bushes + in fields + common babool etc. Restless like all bayas, twisting, turning this way & that. Many seen feeding in water choked fields of paddy. Some birds taking a bath & flying into a nearby bush in a shower of spray.
Both sexes in full Br. Pl. Colly in some nuptial twittering & display at nest. (Included are all Bayas B.B.W., Baya + Str-H)

By the time the trip came to an end, both riflemen had been blooded: a male and a female in breeding plumage had been collected and stored on ice for their trip to Mumbai. More importantly, we had firmly established that there was a considerable breeding population of these birds in this area. Now, more than 35 years later, of course, the species is well-known in the Hyderabad regions. The next time you see one however, spend a few moments thinking of the trials and tribulations we had to go through to get them on the Hyderabad list! Both Rajeev and me were "arrested" by our Honorary Wildlife Warden, who did not fail to remind us that he had caught us "red-handed" as it were, (since I had a drop of blood on my finger from a thorn and Rajeev was dipping into tomato-chutney)! It was only the presence of our scientific savants that saved us from being marched off peremptorily to a dungeon cell!

Hot cups of tea on the banks of the sluggishly flowing Musi, a contemplation of a most glorious sunset and we were back home, well content, with perhaps the exception of the Honorary Wildlife Warden. The defunct birds were housed overnight in the freezer box of the refrigerator (to the scandalised horror of my mother), and the following day, (a taxidermist having been called in), a stout carton was soon on its way to Mumbai. What happened later? Well, the Black-breasted Weaver found a place on the list of birds of Hyderabad! Remember this, the next time you see one!

***Note***: Several names may be unfamiliar to the younger set of birders. I suggest that readers use the following publications to identify the species:

1. Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan by Salim Ali and S. Dillon Ripley
2. A Synopsis of the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent by S. Dillon Ripley

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## HUNT UNDER THE CLOUDS

**Report: Rollapadu, 26th August 2017**

Text & Photos: YSRK Prasad

**Bonelli's Eagle**

The Nimbostratus clouds welcomed our team of four birdwatchers, early on the morning of August 26th, with the smoky greyish cloud spreading like a perfectly woven carpet, and preventing the sun rays from kissing the green pastures of the Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary, the unique dry grassland of the Andhra Pradesh. Formed in 1988 to protect the endangered bird, the Great Indian Bustard, the sanctuary has 77 species of grasses, as mentioned in the one of the research papers authored by C Sudhakar Reddy and K Thulsi Rao.

A herd of Blackbuck, with beautiful spiral horns, grazed on the droplet-covered blades of grass. The clouds blotted out the sun and didn't provide very positive signs of happy birding. A threat to a birder's plans results in utter pandemonium. While we were hesitating slightly to explore the unique open grasslands of Rollapadu, due to the unsupportive climate, the members of the Corvid family greeted us by crowing at the top of their lungs. There was nothing more consistent than rain on the day, which transformed the brownish-orange summer grass to a green cover, and exposed the sprawling greenish blades of grass to the birds of prey to hunt with ease. I had missed the petrichor, as it was raining the previous night. Spread across 6.4 sq kms, the sanctuary is known for the Lesser Florican display. This sanctuary also attracts a good variety of raptors, such as Black-shouldered Kite, Oriental Honey-buzzard, Short-toed Snake Eagle, Indian Spotted Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, Booted Eagle, Tawny Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, White-eyed Buzzard, Eurasian Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, Pallid Harrier etc.

Unperturbed by the danger posed by the cauliflower-shaped clouds, our birding commenced with an interesting sighting of a raptor. We could see a silhouette, which was a long distance away and quite unidentifiable. We approached a bit closer and found it was the ferocious Bonelli's, perching with its natural instincts of a killer, dominating the scene. Our curiosity pushed us closer to the tree. The weather was calm, and the scene was dull and uninteresting except for the raptor on the high tree. I was sanguine of grabbing a decent photograph or at least a record shot. A detailed photograph, at the time, was beyond imagination due to the bad weather. Having settled like the Egyptian Pharaoh on a throne, the majestic raptor had a good chance of making use of the low vegetation cover that provides access to prey.

The haughty eagle's hungry eyes combed every corner of the green carpet, investigating every quarter for a prey, just like the General Atomics MQ-9 Reaper, the hunter-killer surveillance drone. While I was watching the eagle with a sense of joy, a small-sized animal ran across my sight, disturbing my observation of the eagle. My focus immediately shifted from sky to the land. Yes, it was a fox. The black tip on the tail could be clearly seen. The fox ran few feet away from us, unaware of the veiled danger called eagle. And the very next moment, I witnessed the silence being overtaken by violence.

The event that would happen in the next few seconds would be remembered forever. The Bonelli's tried to attack the fox!

The fox managed to escape in the first attempt, after being flogged by the implacable raptor. The next attack was more ferocious than the first. The eagle, with no delay and hesitation, tried to hit the fox. The fox looked utterly clueless. After sensing the danger to its life, the fox immediately made a quick dive and jump to escape into the den and disappeared from the scene. The surprise attack on the fox intensified my curiosity, as a wildlife enthusiast. Undoubtedly, the openness of the habitat determined the eagle's hunt. Now, did the eagle try to kill or chase the fox?

Large wings, powered by the merciless instinct of the eagle, tried to knock down the fox. In the scene, where a battle was fought for survival, the fox relied on its strength of dominance over the area. If the fox had panicked, it could have easily fallen prey to the hunting eagle.

**First impression**

Some experts, like the veteran birder from BSAP, Humayun Taher, opined that the eagle was not trying to kill the fox, but was chasing the fox away, either to save a fallen prey, or its nest. I cannot rule out Humayun's observation. A doubt arose as to whether Bonelli's eagles kill foxes for food. A quick research on the internet revealed that Bonelli's eagles do indeed kill foxes. Sabyasachi Patra, a well-known wildlife filmmaker (www.indiawilds.com) has mentioned one incident that involved Eastern Imperial Eagle killing a desert fox. The eagles are different, but the instincts remain the same. Foxes and wolves also form the diet of the Bonelli's eagles (refer http://www.oiseaux-birds.com/card-bonelli-eagle.html).

The areas surrounding Rollapadu are filled with cotton and paddy crops. Farmers use pesticides to kill the insects and worms. The whole region is converted into a chemical zone, which is no longer an attractive destination for birds. Many birds such as Harriers have stopped or reduced their visits to the sanctuary due to non-availability of grasshoppers, owing to the change in the landscape forced by the Telugu Ganga project. The excessive use of insecticides seems to have killed the beneficial insects along with the harmful ones. Less number of birds might have forced the raptors to hunt prey – whatever helps them survive! My internet research revealed several instances of eagles killing foxes. If there had been a hit on the skull or nape of the fox, wouldn't the eagle feast on the meat? It definitely would, in my opinion.

Did the eagle chase away the scavenger fox to protect its food, hidden in the tall grass? There is no clear evidence to postulate that the eagle was chasing away the fox from the scene to protect a kill. We had observed the perching eagle for almost 20 minutes from a distance. If there had been a kill, wouldn't the eagle have stayed next to the kill, instead of perching on the tree? I believe the eagle would not have allowed the fox to come closer. But the point of perch was far from where the fox appeared. The grass not being tall enough to conceal a kill, I feel the eagle would have remained on the same patch to eat the kill, after chasing away the fox. But we saw the Bonelli's flying to another part of the sanctuary.

**Second impression**

Based on the observations made by Humayun and Phani Raavi, I cross-checked the photographs once again and noticed the following aspects, which differ from my first impression:

1. The eagle swooped down to the ground and almost hit the fox. The fox escaped and stood at a distance from the eagle. The eagle, after missing a chance, didn't display eagerness to attack immediately. Did the eagle intend to just chase away the fox?

2. The fox stared at the eagle and did not try to run away, which indicates the animal was not expecting an attack. The fox, at this stage, would have started to think about its next move. The eagle was also waiting to launch the next powerful attack.

3. The eagle decided to hit, or maybe chase away, the fox, and the fox escaped. The eagle then landed again after clearly communicating its intention.

4. In the last stage, the final attack looked wild and dangerous, as the eagle almost knocked the fox, though the fox escaped.

If the eagle's intention was to kill the fox, then it would have directly pounced on the animal with all might and killer intention. Why would the eagle wait and launch the attack a bit later? Is this kind of 'wait and attack' part of the wild?

The moment the Bonelli's chased the fox, my instincts conveyed it as a hunt. A few photographs also convey that the eagle chased the fox. The team left the spot immediately and further probe into the event didn't occur, which is much needed for a birdwatcher, and which possibly may have provided more relevant information.

Anyway, whether it was a chase or a hunt, the Bonelli's showed its strength, supremacy and uncompromising character, whereas the fox displayed its clever thinking. Smartness eventually prevailed over the brutality.

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## Trip Report: Fox Sagar, Hyderabad, 23rd July 2017

Vinit Nair

**Painted Stork, Lesser Whistling-duck, Glossy Ibis and Spot-billed Duck** (Photo: Vinit Nair)

It was a wonderful morning and I was looking forward to join the BSAP group for an exciting day of birding. I reached Panjagutta Circle at 6:00AM, where I met Aasheesh and Surekha. After the introductions, we headed out to Suchitra Circle, where we met the rest of the group. Since we intended to cover two lakes – Fox Sagar and Shamirpet Lake backwaters, we started without much delay.

Fox Sagar is locally known as *Kolla Cheruvu*. The interesting thing about such trips is that you learn so many amazing facts about places that you never knew existed. I was intrigued by the name 'Fox Sagar', and after some enquiring, I learnt that the Nizam had constructed a dam on the lake naming it Fox Sagar. In 1897, a pump house was built on the bund, in characteristic Nizam architecture.

As soon as we got there, we were greeted by the traditional calls of the Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*); they were warning other birds that birders were around. The lake was covered in water hyacinth which had taken over a considerable portion of the lake, and thus provided a good cover for a pair of Common Moorhens (*Gallinula chloropus*).

**Red-wattled Lapwing** (Photo: Vinit Nair)

We saw a brown streaked bird chasing away the moorhens in the hyacinth-covered lake. The photographers stormed into action to take shots of the bird, which was difficult, considering it was hidden in the hyacinth. However, after some initial attempts, we managed to capture good record shots of the bird. Excitedly, we reviewed the shots and exchanged thoughts and theories on what the bird was; some suggested it could be a juvenile moorhen, others a juvenile lapwing, but none of us were sure. Further investigation revealed it to be the Watercock (*Gallicrex cinerea*).We had had a rare sighting. A lucky start indeed!

**Watercock (female)** (Photo: Vinit Nair)

**Plain Prinia** (Photo: Vinit Nair)

We then saw many birds like Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Plain Prinia (*Prinia inornata*), Ashy Prinia (*Prinia socialis*), Rosy Starling (*Pastor roseus*) and several others. Our tally ended with a total sighting of 30+ birds which was a great start for the day. While returning to our vehicles, Aasheesh identified a pair of Jacobin Cuckoos (*Clamator jacobinus*) sitting on the topmost branch of a nearby tree. We were then joined by Srikanth and Gokul, who escorted us to Shamirpet Lake.

**Ashy Prinia** (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Recharging ourselves with some snacks and tea, and a much needed break, we proceeded towards our next destination, Shamirpet Lake. Srikanth and Gokul took a different route which led to a better section at the back of the lake. As soon as we reached the location, we could see that the lake housed many water birds like Painted Storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*), Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), Lesser Whistling-ducks (*Dendrocygna javanica*), River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*), Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*) and Little Grebes (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*).

**Indian Grey Hornbill** (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

**River Tern** (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

Needless to say, the zoom lenses and binoculars came out of the bags once again, and we got to work. We also spotted some raptors like Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) and Short-toed Snake Eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*) flying high above us. Shortly after this, people started to move around the lake individually or in small groups.

**Red-necked Falcon** (Photo: Vinit Nair)

As I walked towards a mound, I saw a bird perched on a thorny bush that looked like a raptor. I was lucky enough to get some decent shots of the bird. Unsure of the identity of the beautiful bird, I took the pictures to Srikanth. He immediately identified the bird as a Red-necked Falcon (*Falco chicquera)*. I was thrilled that I could get a shot of this elusive raptor.

**Sykes's Lark** (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

The bevy of larks in the nearby fields, including the Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark (*Eremopterix griseus*) and the Sykes's Lark (*Galerida deva*), was a delightful sight and they played cheerful hosts to our cameras.

**Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark** (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

As the day went by, the group decided to head back to the city. The trip was a welcome break from routine, and it was with a heavy heart that we returned to the concrete jungle, only to look forward to another weekend with birds.

**Asian Pied Starling** (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

**Purple Swamphen** (Photo: Dr G Samuel Sukumar)

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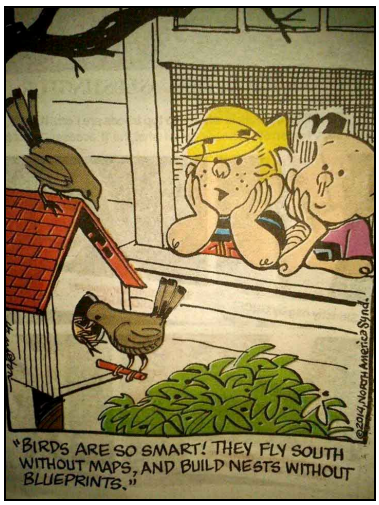
## Bird Humour

Contributed by Shafaat Ulla




(From The Telegraph, 01-03-2014)

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## Bird of the Month

Text and Photo: Umesh Mani

# Plain Prinia (*Prinia inornata*)

**Plain Prinia** (Inkriyal, Hyderabad, 31-10-2010)

Order: Passeriformes
Family: Cisticolidae
Genus: *Prinia*
Species: *P. inornata*
Size: 13-14 cm

Description & distribution: A small warbler of the *Cisticolidae* family, the Plain Prinia is a resident breeder in most parts of its range, that extends from Pakistan and India across to south China and south-east Asia.

The Plain Prinia is a typical Prinia, with a slender body, longish tail, short, rounded wings with rufous fringes, and strong legs, orange in colour. The face is off-white, with a whitish ear panel and a marked white supercilium. The upperparts in the breeding male are greyish brown, deepening in colour towards the rump. Underparts are whitish buff. The bill is black in breeding birds, and shows a dark upper mandible and pale lower mandible in non-breeding birds. Winter birds show warmer brown upperparts and more buff underparts, and generally have a longer tail than in summer. Both sexes are identical. The Sri Lankan race retains its summer plumage, including the shorter tail, all year around.

Habitat & behaviour: The Plain Prinia is shy and skulks more often than it ventures out into the open. It is usually found singly or in pairs, in wet lowland grassland, open woodland, scrub forests and occasionally gardens near human habitation. Its diet mainly consists of insects, though it does occasionally take butterflies, dragonflies, beetles etc.

The basic call of the Plain Prinia is a monotonous *chee chee*, while the song is a repetitive *tiee-tiet-tiet* call.

Nesting: The Plain Prinia usually builds its nest on a shrub or in tall grass. The usual clutch consists of 3-6 oval eggs, off-white or cream, with variable brown veins, spots or blotches.

Local name: The Plain Prinia is known as *'phutki'* in Hindi, *'lota-kun-jitta'* in Telugu, *'piddi'* in Punjabi and *'pan fadakfutki'* in Gujarati.

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**For Private Circulation Only**
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